



**You have downloaded a document from  
RE-BUS  
repository of the University of Silesia in Katowice**

**Title:** The Polish experiment 1980-1989 -revolution or transformation?  
Antinomies of transition from authoritarianism to democracy

**Author:** Zbigniew Kantyka

**Citation style:** Kantyka Zbigniew. (2014). The Polish experiment 1980-1989 - revolution or transformation? Antinomies of transition from authoritarianism to democracy. "Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis" (T. 13 (2014), s. 25-43).



Uznanie autorstwa - Użycie niekomercyjne - Bez utworów zależnych Polska - Licencja ta zezwala na rozpowszechnianie, przedstawianie i wykonywanie utworu jedynie w celach niekomercyjnych oraz pod warunkiem zachowania go w oryginalnej postaci (nie tworzenia utworów zależnych).



UNIWERSYTET ŚLĄSKI  
W KATOWICACH



Biblioteka  
Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



Ministerstwo Nauki  
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

Zbigniew Kantyka

# The Polish experiment 1980—1989 — revolution or transformation? Antinomies of transition from authoritarianism to democracy

Each revolution had been cursed and blessed,  
but the results seemed equally remote from the darkest  
forebodings of its victims and the brightest hopes of its leaders.<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The article is an attempt to assess some of the key aspects of the Polish breakthrough of 1980–1989 in the context of the many years of discussion about the nature and consequences of the events that took place during that period. The main considerations include resolving the still valid dilemma of whether it is justified to define this breakthrough as a revolution. The text contains a presentation and evaluation of the main arguments made for and against such a conclusion. In methodological terms, the discourse involves confronting the characteristic features relating to the genesis, goals, process and results of the Polish experiment of 1980–1989, with the theoretical knowledge on the phenomenon of the revolution based on historical analyses and contemporary experience.

In science, the term “experiment” is usually used to describe cognitive processes involving an intentional interference of the researcher in the real world in order to acquire cognitive data. It happens, however, that certain unique phenomena and processes characterised by an objective course of events, which scientists can analyse in similar terms to a conventional induced experiment, enter the scope of this concept. In certain circumstances, a systematic observation of events which have not been induced by the researcher, but are exceptional and important in themselves, can provide the key to discovering the sense, regularities, and mechanisms of the real world. This is significant for social and political studies in particular, in which the space for utilising the classical, natural sciences-based experiment, is very limited.

The Polish political events of 1980–1989 made way for further disintegration of the colonial-imperial division of the world by initiating the fall of the Eastern Bloc. It turned out

---

<sup>1</sup> I. Berlin: *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*. New York 1996, p. 29.

to be not just an episode, but an effective initiation of a powerful and extensive process that led to a total change in the global geopolitical system. The fact that it happened in the centre of Europe, rather than in its peripheries, exacerbated the surprise of such a course of events, and of its final result in particular.

**Key words:** democratic transformation, revolution, post-totalitarian authoritarianism, Solidarity movement, Self-Governing Republic

The success of the democratic paradigm of social life is, next to the disintegration of colonialism, undoubtedly one of the most important facts in the political history of the 20th century. Regardless of the specific assessments and analysis, it is beyond discussion that the Polish political events of 1980—1989 activated the next stage in the disintegration of the imperial and colonial world — namely disintegration of the so-called real-socialism block of countries. It turned out not to be only an instance, but an effective initiation of a powerful and extensive process that led to the complete change in the global geopolitical system. The fact that this occurred in the centre of Europe, and not in its peripheries, surmounted that surprise of the events the unfolded, their course and, in particular, of the final result.

The term “experiment” is usually used in science to describe cognitive processes involving an intentional interference of the researcher in the real world for purpose of acquiring cognitive data. It happens, however, that certain unique phenomena and objective processes enter the scope of this concept, which scientists can analyse in a similar way to the conventional induced experiment. This applies both to phenomena found in the social sphere and in the natural world, which are independent of the researcher. When using this term to refer to a special moment in the political history of Poland, Europe and the world, I apply it in full knowledge of the consequences resulting from its application in such a broad sense, remaining convinced, that only in exceptional circumstances may there exist such a thing as a “natural experiment” – a concept which seemingly is internally contradictory, because it distorts the sharp distinction between the terms observation and experiment in their traditional sense.<sup>2</sup> In certain circumstances, the systematic observation of exceptional and important events which have not been induced by the investigator can provide the key to discovering the point and regularity of the mechanisms of the real world. This is particularly important in social, and especially political, studies, in which the sphere for applying the classical,

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Sułek: *Eksperyment w badaniach społecznych*. Warszawa 1979, pp. 16—18. With regard to the political events of 1980—1981 in Poland, the term “experiment” is used for instance by Andrzej Fiszke in the newest historical monograph on this period. See A. Friszke: *Rewolucja Solidarności 1980—1981*. Kraków 2014, pp. 973—974.

natural sciences-based, experiment, is very limited. The main problem is, of course, striving to search for knowledge about transformations in the macro-social scale, determined by a complex combination of ideological, economic and cultural considerations.

There is a plethora of detailed descriptions of historical events of the 1980—1989 period based on many available documents and accounts, as well as the increasingly numerous, often different, attempts at their interpretation. From the point of view of political sciences, what is most important is the sense of what happened. Although it is likely that we still do not know all the facts, and information not available today will surely contribute to a new understanding in the future, it seems, however, that these will not be sources which will fundamentally change the theoretical analysis capabilities we have today.

The article is an attempt to assess some of the key aspects of the Polish breakthrough of 1980—1989 in the context of the many years of discussion about the nature and consequences of the events that took place during that period. It is not intended as a detailed analysis of the course of events and facts, as these have already been covered in numerous domestic and foreign historical, sociological and political research studies.<sup>3</sup> The main considera-

---

<sup>3</sup> The complete bibliography of research texts on this issue is very extensive. Worth mentioning are the following references, as they go beyond a descriptive and historical narrative, and are a source of theoretical inspiration: *After the Collapse of Communism: Comparative Lessons of Transition*. Eds. M. McFaul, K. Stoner-Weiss. Cambridge 2004; T.G. Ash: *The Magic Lantern. The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague*. Cambridge 1993; Idem: *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity 1980—1982*. London 1983; N. Bandelj: *From Communists to Foreign Capitalists: The Social Foundations of Foreign of Foreign Direct Investments in Postsocialist Europe*. Princeton 2008; S. Birch: *Electoral Systems and Political Transformation in Post-Communist Europe*. Basingstoke—New York 2003; V. Bunce: "Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Post-communist Experience." *World Politics* 2003, Vol. 55, No. 2, pp. 167—192; *Central and East European Politics. From Communism to Democracy*. Eds. S.L. Wolchik, J.L. Curry. Lanham 2011; A.M. Cirtautas: *The Polish Solidarity Movement: Revolution, Democracy and Natural Rights*. London 1997; T.D. Clark: *Beyond Post-communist Studies: Political Science and the New Democracies of Europe*. New York 2002; *The Consolidation of Democracy in East-Central Europe*. Eds. K. Dawisha, B. Parrott. Cambridge 1997; *Democratization in Eastern Europe: Domestic and International Perspectives*. Eds. G. Pridham, T. Vanhanen. London 1994; R.H. Dix: "Eastern Europe's Implications for Revolutionary Theory." *Polity* 1991, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 227—242; *Eastern Europe: Transformation and Revolution 1945—1991. Documents and Analyses*. Ed. L.H. Legters. Lexington 1992; A.G. Frank: "Revolution in Eastern Europe: Lessons for Democratic Social Movements (and Socialists?)." *Third World Quarterly* 1990, Vol. 12, Issue 2, pp. 36—52; *Freedom and Choice in a Democracy: The Difficult Passage to Freedom*. Eds. R. Magliola, R. Khuru. Washington 2004; J.K. Glenn: "Contentious Politics and Democratization: Comparing the Impact of Social Movements of the Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe." *Political Studies* 2003, No. 51, pp. 103—120; M.F. Goldman: *Revolution and Change in Central and Eastern Europe*.

tions involve resolving the still valid dilemma of whether it is justified to define this breakthrough as a revolution. The text contains a presentation and evaluation of the main arguments made for and against such a conclusion. In methodological terms, the discourse involves confronting the characteristic features relating to the genesis, goals, process and results of the Polish experiment of 1980—1989, with the theoretical knowledge on the phenomenon of the revolution derived from historical analyses and contemporary experience.

## The genesis

August 1980 brought about the ultimate collapse of the myth of the classlessness of Polish society, which constituted one of the cornerstones of the ideology of “real socialism.” The social order, which had been formed since 1945, according to the rules contained in resolutions of the party, in the propaganda and the official interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, was meant to destroy antagonistic social divisions. Achievement of this state was announced officially in Poland in the 1970s by announcing the “the moral-political unity of the nation.” This image of social structure lacked revolutionary potential — the role of the state led by a dominant party came down only to administration involving the technical resolving of marginal conflict, which did not have any ideological-political background. In reality, in this seemingly classless society deep divisions were still in place,<sup>4</sup> the masking

---

*Political, Economic, and Social Challenges*. Armonk 1997; S. Huntington: *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*. Norman—London 1991; K. Kumar: “The Revolutions of 1989 in East-Central Europe and the Idea of Revolution.” In: *Culture, Modernity and Revolution. Essays in Honor of Zygmunt Bauman*. Eds. R. Kilminster, I. Varcoe. New York 1996, pp. 127—153; J.J. Linz, A. Stepan: *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore 1996; A. Przeworski: *Democracy and the Market. Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. New York 1991; *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy*. Eds. R.D. Anderson Jr., M.S. Fish, S.E. Hanson, P.G. Roeder. Princeton 2001; Ch. Tilly: *European Revolutions 1492—1992*. Oxford 1995; *Transitions to Capitalism and Democracy in Russia and Central Europe: Achievements, Problems, Prospects*. Ed. M.D. Hancock, J. Logue. Westport 2000; *Transition to Democracy in Poland*. Eds. R.F. Staar. Basigstoke 1998 (2nd edn); J.H.H. Weiler: “The Transformation of Europe.” *The Yale Law Journal* 1991, Vol. 100, No. 8, pp. 2403—2483; H.A. Welsh: “Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe.” *Comparative Politics* 1994, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 379—394; S. White: *Communism and Its Collapse*. New York 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See S. Magala: *Walka klas w bezklasowej Polsce*. Gdańsk 2012.

of which through intensive indoctrination and suppression by means of the regime's repression mechanism could not be sustained.

From the point of view of the chances of making a real change, not without significance was the fact that as a result of the evolution forced by the political events of 1956 and 1970, the existing system significantly distanced itself from the model of pure totalitarianism, whose main characteristic is absolute conformism achieved by means of terror, as well as constant and ever-present organised moral-political pressure.<sup>5</sup> The term "totalitarianism" is too strong a word to describe the Polish post-war political system. It can only be used to refer to the few years of radical Stalinism.<sup>6</sup> Although the leaders of the ruling party intended to achieve complete governance covering all spheres of existence of the individual and the collective, they failed to achieve this state.<sup>7</sup> Post-totalitarian authoritarianism<sup>8</sup> with an incompletely nationalised economy and private individual agriculture, an autonomous Church, a controlled democratic opposition and a delusive "socialist" ideology, created potentially new possibilities for the contestation of the existing reality. Nevertheless, the fact that the Polish workers' protest of August 1980 opened the chances for a real, far-reaching qualitative transformation of the political system, heralding and implying changes in the political history of the world, came as an absolute surprise to everybody. Neither the rulers, who not only prior to August 1980, but virtually right up to 4 June 1989, nor the leaders and activists of illegal opposition structures, were aware of the scale of the approaching change. Polish sociology and political sciences turned out to be helpless.<sup>9</sup> The intensive analytical and prognostic work performed over the years by western Sovietology centres also proved worth little. Unexpectedly, a local workers' strike at one of the Polish shipyards sparked an avalanche of macro-social effects which altered the political history of the world.

<sup>5</sup> A. Walicki: "Totalitaryzm i posttotalitaryzm. Próba definicji." In: Idem: *Polskie zmagania z wolnością. Widziane z boku*. Kraków 2000, pp. 104—105.

<sup>6</sup> A. Touraine: *Solidarność. Analiza ruchu społecznego 1980—1981*. Gdańsk 2010, pp. 49—53.

<sup>7</sup> K. Kersten: "O użyteczności konceptu totalitaryzmu w badaniach historii PRL." In: Eadem: *Pisma rozproszone*. Eds. T. Szarota, D. Libionka. Toruń 2005, p. 372.

<sup>8</sup> L. Mażewski: *Posttotalitarny autorytaryzm PRL 1956—1989. Analiza ustrojowopolietyczna*. Warszawa—Biała Podlaska 2010, p. 9: "This was, like any authoritarianism, a system of limited power, as opposed to totalitarianism, which signifies a system of unlimited power, wishing to subdue not only the area of traditional politics, but also the social domain as a whole."

<sup>9</sup> See A. Sułek: "O nieprzewidywalności rewolucji. Dlaczego polska socjologia nie przewidziała „Solidarności”." In: Idem: *Obrazy z życia socjologii w Polsce*. Warszawa 2011, pp. 243—265.



## Values and aims

Earlier manifestations of disobedience, revolt, protests within the political system of “real socialism,” were limited in their extent. As in many other cases known from history, they were not revolutionary in nature, because “the aim of such rebellions was not a challenge of authority or the established order of things as such; it was always a matter of exchanging the person who happened to be in authority.”<sup>10</sup>

The declared objectives of Solidarity’s programme were very much aligned to this model, and went beyond it only slightly. As aptly noted by Jerzy Holzer, “it is doubtful that destruction of communist rule was either the primary or even secondary objective of Solidarity. The aim was to restrict its scope of activity, to change the system.”<sup>11</sup> Marginalisation of the radical voices within the movement, since such of course existed, stemmed from past experience and awareness of the existing conditions. It was the result of realism and pragmatism, which led to deliberate “self-limitation” of the scale of the voiced demands. In fact, however, the current practical activities and the proposals for reform being developed, as a result of their consequences, led to a fundamental change in the political system — hence they had a revolutionary dimension. The crisis of 1980, unlike the earlier disturbances in the functioning of “real socialism” in Poland, for the first time “became a turning point, and not, as before, a situation of a special regulation, reducing tension only for a period of time.”<sup>12</sup>

It is this very feature — the qualitative, radical, profound change in the political system, which received the most prominent position in most of the modern definitions of revolution, which takes into account the experiences of the so-called third wave of democratisation.<sup>13</sup> According to Andrew Heywood, “revolutions differ from rebellions and revolts in that they bring about fundamental change, a change in the political system itself, as opposed to merely the displacement of a governing elite or a change of policy.”<sup>14</sup>

The dilemma — freedom or equality? — appeared already in ancient times, when the idea of isonomy fell — a system based on full political equality of all members of the community, ruling out the existence of a higher power and a permanent separation between the rulers and the ruled.

---

<sup>10</sup> H. Arendt: *On Revolution*. London 1973, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Holzer: “„Solidarność” — rewolucja, powstanie czy reforma. Dyskusja panelowa.” In: *Solidarność od wewnątrz 1980–1981*. Eds. A. Friszke, K. Persak, P. Sowiński. Warszawa 2013, p. 346.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Staniszkis: *Postkomunizm. Próba opisu*. Gdańsk 2001, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> See S.P. Huntington: *The Third Wave...*

<sup>14</sup> A. Heywood: *Key Concepts in Politics*. Basingstoke—London 2000, p. 182.

This solution permanently connected both values — freedom could only be realized among equals, equality was the necessary condition for the existence of freedom, it was its essence.<sup>15</sup> A part of this idea was incorporated into the model of ancient communal democracy based on the idea of (positive) political freedom. Modernity and liberalism questioned this way of thinking about how social life is organised and opted for individualism and civic (negative) freedom which became the basis of political governance in a capitalist country.

“Real socialism” was a solution which was based on a delusive declarative “socialist democracy,” in which the real limits of freedom were defined by the ruling elite. Challenging this order could therefore lead to two, significantly different, developments — rejection of the principle of community in favour of liberal individualism, or an attempt to fill the socialist idea of empowerment of the people with real substance.

The choice was clear — “the revolution of Solidarity was to ‘citizenise’ freedom, to make it public. It was a revolution in the concept of freedom itself, which guided social relations, culminating in a largely successful attempt to restore the freedom in all its dimensions. Its essence was the citizens’ garnering of the courage to reveal themselves publically, and as a consequence, make them politically committed.”<sup>16</sup> It was, therefore, about the joining together of the majority in order to settle public issues, about participatory democracy, in which the role of the citizen would not only involve casting votes into the ballot box.

Alain Touraine, while summarizing the first phase of the Polish revolution which culminated in martial law, clearly stressed that “workers do not dream of returning to capitalism, looking for responsibility for the whole nation, also because the communist Poland awarded the workers a central place in society.”<sup>17</sup> It was not therefore about abandoning the model, but rather to fill in the declarative ideological slogan with real substance. Solidarity’s demand for an authentic empowerment of the working class, paradoxically, was axiologically justified in the ideals of socialism and of communism, which were clearly voiced, but in practice remained unfulfilled by the ruling elite.

“The idea of self-government was based on the participation of all employees in the decisions and accountability and in reconciling divergent interests. Was it feasible? It was certainly not implemented after 1989. Nevertheless, this idea granted Solidarity dynamism, mass support, the perspective, which it sought to achieve, and thus gave it the power needed to pursue it.”<sup>18</sup> The country which was constructed in the post-revolutionary period with its legal

<sup>15</sup> H. Arendt: *Kondycja ludzka*. Warszawa 2000, p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> E. Ciżewska: *Filozofia publiczna Solidarności*. Warszawa 2010, p. 118.

<sup>17</sup> A. Touraine: *Solidarność. Analiza...*, p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> A. Friszke: *Rewolucja Solidarności...*, p. 975.



and institutional standards, and, in particular, their practical implementation, not only failed to pursue its original aspirations, but denied them altogether. In place of a system based on pseudo-democratic Leninist authoritarianism, a new order was created, in which freedom, despite legal guarantees, remained of symbolic value. In-depth debates on public affairs, about the goals and methods of action for achieving common good, had altogether disappeared. Social life was atomised, becoming a collective sum of the fate of groups and individuals who have been separated from one another.

In the economic sphere, the most painful disappointment as to the effects of the revolution, is associated with deep, progressive social stratification — a drastic diversification of standards of living and availability of consumer goods. This is particularly striking in light of the statistical economic growth, which after 1989 became an undisputed fact. An element of the idea of solidarity, on which the political programme of change built in 1980—1981 was based, was a concept of a fair share in the income created by the community, far from the primitive *urawniłowka* (artificial egalitarianism), which, however, was based on the concept of social egalitarianism.

The “Programme for the construction of a Self-Governing Republic of Poland” presented and adopted at the first Congress of Solidarity established that the basic unit of the economy would be the social enterprise, managed by the workers through the workers’ council, which would be operatively managed by a director elected in a contest by the council. The council would also be responsible for dismissing him. It was entrusted with national property to be managed in the interest of society and its own workforce.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the economic result of the system change was stratification instead of equality. The privatized economy resulted in a replacement of the former differences arising out of the voluntary sharing of goods according to the criterion of political discretion, with much more radical disproportions resulting from the ruthlessness of the free market economy. A system which was a contradiction of the ideals and expectations, which lay at the root of the workers’ uprising, was created. The views of the neoliberal-leaning, change-inclined economists, which stood at the margins of the political discussion, gradually gained in importance, eventually to become the basis for the economic reconstruction plan to be put into action. A feedback loop appeared between free-market economic theories and political practice. The different versions of managing companies, which had grown out of socialist ideology, aimed at creating a real system of workers’ self-governance. The marketization manoeuvre did not prove to be a neces-

---

<sup>19</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 684. See also: P. Załęski: “Czy Solidarność była społeczeństwem obywatelskim? Jak został zapomniany neorepublikański projekt samorządnej Rzeczypospolitej.” *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 2010, No. 4, pp. 141—152.

sary, painful episode, but a long-term strategy. Successive coalition governments, regardless of their ideological orientation, were headed in the same direction, that is focussing on the market and not the social aspect of the “social market economy” formula. This scenario greatly contradicted the interests and expectations of the masses of workers. It was, however, consistent, and this most probably was not a coincidence, with the needs of the old and new political elites seeking to strengthen their position in the economic sphere.

Of course, dissatisfaction with the system change effects not only concerned the economic dimension, though this is where resentment and longing for socialist 1970s Poland was primarily focussed. More important seems to be the wider dimension — the general feeling of injustice arising from the new privileges gained by the rulers. It is this immanent feature of the system of “real socialism” which the Solidarity revolution was directed against. Improvement of the economic position and the standard of living during the governance of Edward Gierek, despite temporary crises and drawbacks, could not obscure the growing lack of ideology of the elites and the increasing gap between the slogans and the particular interests of the party and state *nomenklatura*. The economy of scarcity was for Polish society, which was hardened by various historical experiences, an acceptable reality, and this state of affairs could have been rationally explained, had it touched upon everybody equally. That, however, was not the case. Initially only in the non-formal realm, which with time was also regulated by legal acts, society was divided into groups which were more equal than others. Sławomir Magala pointed for instance to the legal regulation of 1972, published in the Official Journal — a Decree on the salaries of persons occupying state administration and political positions and the members of their families, which had sanctioned the so far informal boundary between the political elite and the rest of society.<sup>20</sup>

An important cause of the strikes of August 1980 was the dissatisfaction of society about the economic situation — the first version of their demands mainly addressed social and welfare issues. The strike, however, had another cause: defending the dignity of the ordinary worker against the unjustified repression of the management of companies. The first demand was the withdrawal of the decision to dismiss Anna Walentynowicz from work on disciplinary grounds five months before reaching her retirement age, Ms. Walentynowicz was known for her activity in trade unions. This was the first act of solidarity. Another decisive factor which determined the further course of events was the spectacular resignation of shipbuilders from their privileged position, which other companies were not granted. They continued the strike,

---

<sup>20</sup> S. Magala: *Walka klas w bezklasowej Polsce...*, pp. 61—62.

even though their own demands were going to be met. As of that moment, thanks to the resignation from egoistic group elitism, a battle had begun for something more — for political objectives. Spiritual values were given importance over materiality: the foundation was “awareness of the capacity to act, not for the benefit of tangible goods, but for developing oneself as an active entity, finding in oneself an embodiment of collective activity.”<sup>21</sup> This meant combining the fight for the implementation of specific individual and group goals and values with the fight for the reconstruction of the general principles of social life.

Lack of political equality in a system of liberal empirical democracy is an evident phenomenon and trend not only from the perspective of the aggressive leftist critique of capitalism. Even Robert Dahl, a leading theoretician of American political pluralism, far in his views from radical social theories, was aware of this. He pointed to the significant potential of the economic model based on the free market in the elimination of authoritarian regimes, putting forward a thesis of the existence of an objective conflict between democracy and free market capitalism, preventing the implementation of full political equality. He stressed that when society and politics are transformed by free market capitalism, the situation changes fundamentally: “material inequality such as capitalism lead to serious political inequalities between citizens.”<sup>22</sup>

The universality and strength of the ideas underlying the Polish revolution of the 1980s was based on, and perhaps above all, the deeper meaning of the idea of freedom, reminiscent of the ancient standard, in which conscious and active participation in deciding matters of the community lay at its core. This was a way of thinking and acting which went beyond the empirical standards existing here and now, promising to build a new system using solutions that were not available in the political regimes of the East and West. The failure of the Polish experiment in this regard can attest to the fact that it was a utopian project. However, it seems that it is precisely this element which drew the interest, and often, the fascination with what happened in Poland after the strikes and the agreements of August 1980. Many things indicated that both for the participants of these events, as well as for external monitors, Poland during this period was becoming the most democratic place in the world.<sup>23</sup> As noted by David Ost, a graphic observer of the Polish revolution and, later, its interpreter, “Solidarity introduced something new, a new way of thinking about power and politics. To change the system, without paying much atten-

---

<sup>21</sup> A. Touraine: *Solidarność. Analiza...*, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> R. Dahl: *O demokracji*. Kraków 2000, p. 165.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. L. Goodwyn: *Jak to zrobiliście? Powstanie Solidarności w Polsce*. Gdańsk 1992, p. 587.

tion to it, that is to change the state, not paying attention to it. To change the system by organizing societies and oneself, not by overthrowing the government and taking power into one's own hands. [...] Solidarity charmed the West with its thinking about politics.”<sup>24</sup>

## The actors

Solidarity, launched as a response to a small-scale conflict initiated by the workers of a plant, turned into a mass social movement. In 1980—1981 the movement gathered the vast majority of Poles interested in what was going on in the political sphere. Large coverage, both in terms of people and territory, is one of the characteristics of every revolution, which, even if it is initiated and coordinated by easily identifiable individuals, goes well beyond the narrow dimensions of such events as political upheaval or coup. From the very beginning, “the so-called workers’ protests — as Jacek Kurczewski writes — were hardly ever the endeavours of workers only, but covered the different groups within the workforce, their parts, to be precise, regardless of the class and employment hierarchy they belonged to.”<sup>25</sup>

A thesis presented in one of the first and very popular descriptions of the Solidarity movement provided by Timothy Garton Ash *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity 1980—1982*<sup>26</sup> that the course of events before and immediately after August 1980 and the platform of the nascent social movement was mainly influenced by opposition intellectuals, and the centre of the “chain of command” was located in Jacek Kuroń’s apartment in Warsaw, is not however supported by facts. For instance, the demand that registration of new independent trade unions, which destroyed the monocentric formula of the system, was implemented as a result of grassroots pressure, despite the moderate reformist demands predominant among the majority of advisors. For them the concept of taking over the official structures of trade unions gathered in the Central Council of Trade Unions after the adoption of the new law on trade union movements, was for them more realistic. “Fortunately, the

<sup>24</sup> D. Ost: „Solidarność” — rewolucja, powstanie czy reforma. Dyskusja panelowa.” In: *Solidarność od wewnątrz 1980—1981...*, p. 349. See also: Idem: *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics. Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968*. Philadelphia 1990; Idem: *Kłeska „Solidarności”. Gniew i polityka w postkomunistycznej Europie*. Warszawa 2007.

<sup>25</sup> J. Kurczewski: “Klasy średnie po latach.” In: Idem: *Ścieżki emancypacji. Osobista teoria transformacji ustrojowej w Polsce*. Warszawa 2009, pp. 217—218.

<sup>26</sup> T.G. Ash: *The Polish Revolution...*

workers had more faith in utopia than sober realism. Contrary to the intellectuals, they decided to demand the impossible.”<sup>27</sup>

The disproportion between the revolutionary desire of labour unions and the conservative realism of the representatives of the intelligentsia was similar in that in both there was a component of a concealed, albeit visible, restrained attitude towards too far reaching manifestations of grassroots activity and a conviction about the leading role of a competent vanguard. In the first phase, when the protest potential spontaneously grew, the structures of the movement began self-organising, the priority was to fight for real empowerment, particularly to grant grassroots union organisations and self-governments in companies the right to cast the decisive vote. Along with the institutionalisation of NSZZ Solidarność, however, increasingly important decisions were being made at the central level, most of which were the result of consultations between leaders with experts and advisors, and were less and less frequently the result of the grassroots activity of the masses striving to achieve change. This was only partly justified by the circumstances related to the extensive scale of the movement. Equally important was the conviction firmly rooted in the minds of the elite opposition that they should decide on the direction and methods of operation by framing the chaotic manifestations of activity of the masses into a rational framework.<sup>28</sup> I think that it is this metamorphosis that we should bear in mind, when in retrospect we try to answer the question of what happened to the activity of Polish society after 1989, when freedom finally became a reality, and why the political and economic policies of the new system so far deviate from the expectations and hopes prevailing in 1980—1981.

The Solidarity we know from before the introduction of martial law, which caused its complete organisational disintegration, never regained its original splendour. However, it still remained present as an idea and gave the representatives acting on its behalf symbolic legitimacy during the Round Table negotiations and some time later, that is in the first phase of the definite dismantling of the political system of “real socialism.” These activities, due to their elitism, stood far from the basic characteristics of the struggle for change of the first stage of the movement’s activity. The formula of participatory democracy was abandoned and the activities led to a restriction of the principle of transparency and openness of activity and decisions. An attempt to explain this diversion can of course be made by citing the conditions formed as a result of the political situation, it is difficult to explain, however, why the retreat from the original ideals, which formed the founding potential of the revolution, became permanent and definitive.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. J. Sowa: “Upadek Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej. Demokratyzacja państwa leninowskiego.” In: Idem: *Ciesz się, późny wnuku! Kolonializm, globalizacja i demokracja radykalna*. Kraków 2008, pp. 402—407.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. L. Goodwyn: *Jak to zrobiliście?*...

## The form

The political change in Poland caused by a protest in 1980 differed substantially in form from the classic modern revolution, mainly due to the fact that it did not require any immediate bloody confrontation between the supporters of change and the defenders of the old political order. By treating the course of events of 1980—1989 as a process, it is possible, as shown by Jan Skórzyński, to clearly define two of its phases, in which the relations between the form and substance were not in synch. In his opinion, “this was a two-faceted revolution: the first one culminating in the introduction of martial law and the other in the fall of communism [...] — in the years 1980—1981 this was a revolutionary process without revolutionary consequences, while in the years 1988—1989 there were revolutionary consequences without the revolutionary *staffage*.”<sup>29</sup> The reluctance to use the term revolution in respect to this period, much more visible in the internal Polish debates than in external comments and evaluations results, among others, from the specific negative connotations of the term and associating it with slogans taken from the dictionary of communist propaganda. The practical and statutory rejection of violence, utilisation of a mechanism of agreements and negotiations as the main means to achieving change, and the willingness to reach compromises, produced real effects. What is more, the consequences of this strategy went far beyond the originally planned objectives — the system collapsed, and the opposition could directly reach for power.

Like previously in Spain and Portugal, also in Poland, it turned out that it is possible to achieve something that in classical revolutions could not happen, that is a real qualitative change in the foundations of the system without an aggressive physical confrontation between opposing parties and bloodshed. The possibility of such a course of events to take place to a certain extent was announced in the philosophical considerations about revolutions by Hannah Arendt, who clearly stressed that whether we are dealing with a revolution or not, does not depend on the scale of violence. According to her, “violence is no more adequate to describe the phenomenon of revolution than change; only where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, to bring about the formation of a new body politic, where the liberation from oppression aims at least at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution.”<sup>30</sup> The thesis of the primacy of substance over form in an assessment of the revo-

---

<sup>29</sup> J. Skórzyński: „Solidarność” — rewolucja, powstanie czy reforma. Dyskusja panelowa.” In: *Solidarność od wewnątrz...*, p. 351.

<sup>30</sup> H. Arendt: *On Revolution...*, p. 35.



lutionism of mass social upheavals was upheld by S. Huntington, who noted that recognition of the existence of a desire for a deep change is the only way to effectively differentiate a revolution from insurrections, rebellions, revolts, coups or wars for independence.<sup>31</sup>

The term “Polish peaceful revolution” has also been used by Rett R. Ludwowski, who was fully aware of the difference between the events that took place in Poland and those of the revolutionary processes of the past, both in terms of their multistage nature and longevity (from August 1980 until the Round Table negotiations and changes of 1989), as well as the absence of abruptness, dynamism and violence-fuelled radicalism.<sup>32</sup>

The choice for holding sit-down strikes as the primary method of protest rather than organising marches and street demonstrations utilised in former uprisings, limited the risk of a recurrence of a bloody confrontation with the enforcement apparatus. In the monocentric state, suppressing a single local strike in which the formulated demands were too far reaching, did not seem to be a daunting task. However, for the first time on such a massive scale, the protest was backed by the workers of other establishments from various sectors and gradually engulfed the city, region, and the whole country. The spontaneous network of contacts and horizontal agreements which had come to be, became the basis for the functioning of a new movement and paved the way for its organization and operation for many months after the signing of the August Agreements. This model of collective action created a space for the use of various forms of direct democracy, not found in conventional organisations and highly hierarchised traditional social movements. Leaders had the full mandate of those whom they represented, and many decisions were prepared jointly, through collective discussion and analysis of the situation, endeavours which could be described as a deliberative democracy.

The form of action — the idea of nonviolence, ultra democracy in the functioning of the group, full transparency of the decision-making process — corresponded with the aspirations. The primary factor which integrated these two planes was the idea of actual empowerment, the abolition of the distinction between “they” and “we” through socialization of all spheres of the functioning of the state, that is politics, economy, media and culture. As aptly stated by Bronisław Geremek, an anti-totalitarian revolution is characterised by the fact that unlike other revolutions “it does not intend to take over power, but is an assertion of the personal rights of the citizen and of

<sup>31</sup> S. Huntington: *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Heaven 1968. Cf. Ch. Tilly: “Rewolucja i rebelia.” In: *Władza i społeczeństwo*. Ed. J. Szczupaczyński. Warszawa 1995, p. 236.

<sup>32</sup> R.R. Ludwowski: “A New Constitutional Model for East-Central Europe.” In: *Freedom and Choice...*, pp. 121—127.

democracy. Acting in the name of freedom and human rights, it rejects the use of violence. It is based on a mass movement of citizens and causes an extreme system change, while avoiding extreme measures.”<sup>33</sup>

The new order was going to be completely different from the existing one. The point of reference was not only authoritarian “real socialism,” but also, among others, through reference to the humanistic and self-government elements present in the socialist movement, the critically evaluated reality of liberal capitalism.

## Results

No revolution has ever reached its aims in full, some have even failed.<sup>34</sup> Demonstrating that the reality after 1989, that is the rules and mechanisms for the functioning of the political system, are qualitatively different from the reality of “real socialism,” is not difficult. Almost everything changed, though the main transformations are visible in the realm of freedom. These facts, despite the years that have passed, are still often questioned in political discussions, journalistic commentaries, and in some reflections on political philosophy. These debates are an effect of the confrontation of these facts on an ideological plane. The Third Republic of Poland, despite its many flaws and imperfections, is certainly not a repetition of PRL. The following question, however, still remain unanswered: If and how does the changed post-authoritarian reality go together with the “idea of novelty,” an element considered as an important gauge for the recognition or non-recognition of the social and political change as a revolution.

Surely there is no universal answer to this dilemma — every evaluation is usually based on a reference to a specific, axiologically shaded paradigm. I think however, that like Boris Buden, the measure of revolutionary radicalism is “not so much the way changes are carried out or the violence of the process, as it is qualitative coverage, which includes the different forms of

---

<sup>33</sup> B. Geremek: “Solidarność jako model wyjścia z komunizmu.” In: *Od Solidarności do wolności. 25 lat. Konferencja międzynarodowa*. Ed. N. Smolar. Warszawa—Gdańsk 2005, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> I agree with the view of Michael Kimmel, that after fulfilment of the basic conditions, that is a real pursuit for a fundamental structural change and a large scale (in coverage and scope) of events, can we talk about a revolution, regardless of whether the objectives of the protest were actually achieved. He defines revolutions as “attempts by subordinate groups to transform the social foundations of political power.” M.S. Kimmel: *Revolution. A Sociological Interpretation*. Cambridge 1990, p. 6.

democracy, both which have never existed, needing to be discovered, and long forgotten ones, its historically ‘immature’ forms or those that were suppressed as a result of repression.”<sup>35</sup>

Can reconstructing and duplicating existing solutions, which are treated as a standard, be considered revolutionary? Poland’s revolution, regardless of its original slogans and activity in the first phase of the overthrow of the authoritarian regime, however, went down the trail of replicating the Western model of capitalism, abandoning the seeds of the new concepts which were visible at the beginning of the country’s dash for liberty.

The “new” capitalistic order which was built after “communism,” instead of the expected empowerment, brought about another form of reification. The unquestioned increase in the scope of freedom understood individualistically was not accompanied by a sense of participation in community life, that is by awareness of co-deciding about its fate, neither on a local, nor a macro scale. This was not the first time modern capitalism demonstrated the ability to absorb novelties without revising its foundations. Analogous adaptability capabilities of this system came to life when faced with the radical counter-cultural youth demands of the end of the 1960s. A widening of the scope of negative freedom and an increase in consumption took place, and the community revolt based on the ideas of the beat-generation was replaced with the narcissistic philosophy of life of the me-generation, that is hippies became yuppies.

The Polish experiment of 1980—1989 is a case of revolutionism which was not fully realised. A change involving the dismantling of the old system resulted in the creation of an anti-hegemonic order, far deviating from the intentions, objectives and expectations of the participants of the anti-authoritarian movement. New forms of political alienation and intensifying stratification in the economic sphere appeared. The deepening of the differences in the level of life is systematically rationalised through the development of formal and legal mechanisms as well as social and cultural patterns which are adequate to the current state of affairs. Various measures are used to achieve this, including the skilful gradual monopolization and concentration of information within the framework of the so-called media convergence process, as well as the achievements of social sciences, whose representatives have departed from research and reflection on the empowerment of society, which was inspired by the ideals of the revolution. The negative attitude of intellectual and political elites to bottom-up processes of the self-organization of society was visible in sociology and political sciences. A picture of the paternalistic elites’ uphill struggle to introduce a rational project of change began to emerge, where all their efforts were

---

<sup>35</sup> B. Buden: *Strefa przejścia. O końcu postkomunizmu*. Warszawa 2012, p. 29.

met with resistance of a society contaminated with the syndrome of *homo sovieticus*.<sup>36</sup>

Of the three perspectives and possibilities for the future: a) a return to the past, involving the revival of the different national and cultural communities, which are separated from each other by traditional border, b) continuation of the current path, with an emphasis on its enhancement and correction, c) qualitative changes, in the form of a post-liberal democracy project — only the third option provides the opportunity to start the process of constructing a social model based on real social rationality. The economic crisis of 2008 is not a mere coincidence or the result of human error in choosing strategy, but the effect of the structural properties of the system.

Of course, in criticizing the specificity of the effects of the process of democratization of Polish society (and other societies emerging from authoritarian governance) one should bear in mind the context, which defines the objectively specific historical and cultural characteristics, which are often — here and now — the foundation of continuity and social cohesion. Incentives to ignore it can appear in ideas put forward by the internal elite or result from the pressure of society. Violent actions, “mechanical attempts to introduce classical structures of ‘modern’ organisations of western societies, in particular too radical attempts in this direction can lead to the misbalancing of social order and to many resultant dangerous and sometimes downright tragic processes.”<sup>37</sup>

It seems that effective reconciliation of traditions with the determinants of the present and future challenges through plain copying of existing standards is impossible. Many things indicate that this is exactly the way we are headed in building a democratic state in Poland. In economic terms, by looking at bare statistical data, we are pursuing this objective with success. However, not much is left from the revolutionary and innovative potential of 1980—1981. By mechanically replicating free market individualistic liberalism (fortunately, not in its 19th-century variety, as some representatives of the Polish extreme right propose) we have resigned from most of the ideas and concepts which were alive at the time of the revolutionary uprising, which contributed to building, above party lines, an authentic community. Its place was taken by alienation and anomie, which was not only a consequence of the adopted economic model, but the result of the domination of extreme elitism in the political sphere. From the formal side — everything is fine, our political system meets all the criteria and standards of modern empirical democracy, and generally achieves relatively high scores in the various indexes of the

<sup>36</sup> Cf. A. Kolasa-Nowak: *Zmiana systemowa w Polsce w interpretacjach socjologicznych*. Lublin 2010, pp. 148—149.

<sup>37</sup> T. Zarycki: “Socjologia krytyczna na peryferiach.” *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 2009, No. 1, p. 119.

level of democratisation. In practice, however, democracy has become and remains such only at face value, behind which there is growing passivity and apathy of the majority, an escape from reflection on public affairs, declining voter turnout, open contestation parties and the political elite.

The question of a semantic nature posed in the title has been repeatedly raised in scientific papers, in the press and political polemics. It is essential, though not fundamental. A lot seems to indicate that the existing terminological confusion caused by the new and different characteristics of the system change that occurred at the turn of the 20th century, as well as by the ideological controversies that surrounded them, which are of particular relevance to the Polish debate on the subject, are of lesser importance than the question of the point of the transformations. Perhaps the simplest solution to the issue of definition is to include the term “revolutionary transformation” into the catalogue of terms of sociological and political science analysis, which Claus Offe used freely, without any additional comment in his work on the democratization of Central European countries, thus negating the seeming contradiction between these two terms.<sup>38</sup> However, the issue of the assessment of the sense and content of revolutionary political change remains open. The new “velvet” revolutions, are significantly different from their classic, modern era prototypes — they feature a characteristic ideological vagueness, multidimensionality and a different rhythm of political, social and cultural processes.<sup>39</sup> For now, the former class-based system of identification of the revolution has been replaced by a criterion built on the basis of the totalitarianism (authoritarianism) — democracy opposition, qualifying as a revolution every transformation of the political regime expanding the realm of political freedom with the basic attributes of modern empirical democracy, such as: pluralism, free universal elections, free flow of information, etc.

And yet a lot indicates that this is not the end of the history which had started in 1980. The theories of transition, which became particularly popular in western literature, describing the changes in Central and Eastern Europe as a more or less inevitable process of transforming undemocratic state socialism into democratic liberal capitalism, cannot be treated otherwise than a modernised version of ideological American developmentalism of the 1960s, in light of which objectively backward peripheral societies are doomed to replicate universal political, economic and cultural mechanisms elaborated by the mature democracies of the West. As noted aptly by B. Buden, “claiming that the actual objective and highest ideal of Polish workers was the liberal democratic capitalism which existed in the West, it would be just as mislead-

---

<sup>38</sup> C. Offe: *Drogi transformacji. Doświadczenia wschodnioeuropejskie i wschodnioniemieckie*. Warszawa—Kraków 1999, p. 42.

<sup>39</sup> J. Staniszkis: *Samooograniczająca się rewolucja*. Gdańsk 2010, pp. 25—26.

ing as stating that they rose because of an increase in the price of meat [...]. Just like the gauge in reality, which they opened with their democratic — and revolutionary! — movement could not be sealed shut by a decrease of meat prices, neither can it be said that the reality of a liberal-democratic society in which they live, is the final realization of their democratic dreams.<sup>40</sup>

An analysis of the contradictions inherent to the mechanisms and consequences of the Polish breakthrough of 1980—1989, regardless of the various controversies and polemics accompanying their assessment, attests to the qualitative nature of the changes which this historic experiment resulted in. The experience of the last decades, the effect of which is a tendency to replace authoritarian regimes with different forms of political democracy, very often by way of transformations, which are different to those characteristic for conventional revolutions, lead to the recognition of not the form, but the substance as a basic measure of the revolutionary nature of the changes in the political systems of today. It is necessary to update the traditional, orthodox understanding of revolution and define it by taking into account the new socio-cultural context.<sup>41</sup> The case of Poland was, and remains, especially because of its international consequences, one of the most important events of this kind in the 20th century. At the same time, a clearly discernible gap between the objectives of the Polish revolution (creation of an anti-authoritarian democratic system based on the principles of social justice) and the final result (reproduction of the capitalist individualistic liberal democracy model) must lead to the conclusion that it did not fully live up to the aspirations and expectations of its participants.

The increasingly discernible crisis of the liberal democracy model and the escalating new sharp lines of division in the 21st century, both within societies, and on a global scale, must lead to the question if the blocked, abandoned and lost ideological and empirical potential of the Polish revolution is still not a significant point of reference to which, sooner or later, we will return.

---

<sup>40</sup> B. Buden: *Strefa przejścia...*, p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Z. Bauman: *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London 1992, p. 179.